
**TESTIMONY OF REP. SHARON ANGLIN TREAT
SPONSOR,
LD 1003: "RESOLVE, TO ESTABLISH A COMMISSION TO STUDY
ACCESSABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION"**

**APRIL 3, 2013
EDUCATION & CULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Good afternoon. Senator Millett, Representative MacDonald, and members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Sharon Treat and I represent House District 79 - the communities of Farmingdale, Hallowell and West Gardiner. I come before you today to present LD 1003, "RESOLVE, TO ESTABLISH A COMMISSION TO STUDY ACCESSABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION."

Regularly, I stop to reflect on how incredibly lucky I have been in my life. Loving parents with great values, living in a wonderful community in a beautiful state, a fascinating job, a top-notch education... Very, very lucky. I was able to attend one of the best colleges in the United States on a scholarship that paid for almost everything, with a tiny loan and work-study contributions from me while in college. No way my parents – schoolteachers -- could ever have paid for that education or tuition at a less expensive school for that matter, even back in the 1970's when the price of a college education was peanuts compared to today.

That college experience and degree gave me incredible advantages, advantages every Mainer should have. Whether it is a community college, the University of Maine, one of our private colleges, the Maine Maritime Academy or an out of state institution of higher education, everyone should have the opportunity to get an education without bankrupting their parents and themselves.

This fall when I was going door to door during the campaign, my experience in comparison to that of current students really came home to me. Repeatedly, I heard from constituents that higher education is out of reach and we need to do something, anything, to address the issue – from looking at the cost of providing education to tuition costs to scholarships and more. At one home, I spent over an hour talking about this issue – with the mom, dad and two children both of whom are attending college but who are completely overwhelmed with the cost and the prospective huge debt that threatens to cloud their futures. They asked me to at least convene a stakeholder group to look at what could be done.

While initially I thought there must be something more immediate that I could do, and I know there are some bills on your agenda today that take steps right away, on reflection, I thought that my constituents had a pretty good idea. While everyone agrees we need to address affordability of higher education and access to it, it's a multi-faceted problem that demands multi-faceted responses. Getting stakeholders in a room to explore the issues and develop solutions and a plan to get from here to where we need to go – including parents and college students – is a thoughtful way to approach what at times can seem to be an insurmountable problem.

As I think we all know, student debt and lack of education affordability is a national economic issue. I have attached some newspaper articles that illustrate the agreement on the problem across the

political spectrum. A March 10th editorial from the New York Times quotes a Federal Reserve study reporting that 43 percent of 25 year olds nationally had student debt in 2012, with 18 percent of borrowers with student loan debts of \$25,000-\$50,000 and nearly 4 percent with balances greater than \$100,000. The editorial states, and I agree, that “Younger Americans who are saddled with bankrupting payments – or credit ratings damaged by delinquency – are in no position to buy homes, save for retirement or start businesses.” Conservative columnist M.D. Harmon quotes from the same report, telling us in a March 9th Kennebec Journal column that “Total student debt has nearly tripled since 2004,” and is “the largest consumer liability after mortgages.”

While I don’t necessarily agree with Mr. Harmon that online degrees are the answer, I do agree with him that we need to look not only at how scholarships are funded, but also how we deliver education as well as the guidance and assistance we provide not only to high school students but also to returning and mid-career students. I have attached to this testimony some articles that relate to rural schools and the fact that some of the best colleges in the country, often those with super-duper financial aid packages like the one I benefited from, rarely enroll students from rural areas (eg, Maine). Students don’t know to apply, guidance provided is inadequate, the colleges don’t recruit, and stellar students who would both greatly add to the diversity of these elite colleges and greatly benefit from the education they provide, miss out. I know perfectly well that if my own parents had not been educators themselves, I probably would not have considered applying to the college I attended and would not have benefited from the significant scholarship available to me (see the attached article, “The Ivy League Was Another Planet”).

Maine has made some real efforts over the past couple of years. From 2011 to 2012, we actually increased state scholarship funding by 5%, at a time when New Hampshire *zeroed out* higher education scholarships; the university system and community colleges have also made a major effort to hold the line on tuition increases. Still, in both 2011 and 2012, Vermont spent \$18 million on higher education scholarships, twice as much as Maine for fewer than half as many residents (see attachment, Policy Snapshot: State Student Grant Aid in New England, New England Board of Higher Education).

Maine’s future is in the balance. I don’t have the answers, but I have confidence that if we get the right people in the room, good ideas and innovation will result. LD 1003 will do that and I urge an “ought to pass” vote. Thank you.